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National Security Planning Group (NSPG) Meeting  
- Tuesday, September 11, 1984, 2:00-3:00 p.m.  
White House Situation Room

SUBJECT: Review of the [ ] and Central America  
Special Activities (TS/S) [ ]

PARTICIPANTS:

The President

The Vice President's Office:  
Admiral Daniel J. Murphy

USUN:  
Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick

State:  
Secretary George P. Shultz  
Asst Sec Chester Crocker  
Asst Sec Langhorne A. Motley

JCS:  
General John W. Vessey, Jr.

OSD:  
Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger  
Under Sec Fred C. Ikle

White House:  
Mr. Edwin Meese, III  
Mr. James A. Baker, III  
Mr. Robert C. McFarlane  
Admiral John M. Poindexter

Justice:  
Attorney General William French Smith

OMB:  
Associate Director Alton Keel

NSC:  
LTCOL Oliver L. North  
Mr. Fred Wetters

CIA:  
Director William J. Casey  
Mr. Duane R. Clarridge

Minutes

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11:12 a.m.: Asst Sec Crocker and Fred Wetters departed the meeting and were replaced by Asst Sec Motley, Duane Clarridge, and Oliver North

Mr. McFarlane: The second part of the meeting agenda deals with special activities in Central America. There are two issues before us. First, the matter of growing Cuban presence and activities in Nicaragua and, second, the possible imminent delivery of L-39 aircraft from Bulgaria after that we will look at the interdiction effort in El Salvador.

The Leadership of the Resistance Forces has indicated concern about the potential arrival of high performance aircraft and the effect of such weapons on the Resistance movement. They have been quite clear about their willingness to destroy these aircraft before they can be put into operation against them. At the same time, they have noted their need for accurate and timely intelligence and technical expertise on how best to perform such an operation.

The question before us is whether or not we are sufficiently concerned about the L-39's that we are willing to support the Resistance Forces in this endeavor.

Director Casey: It is obvious from the intelligence that the Cubans are much more active in Nicaragua than they have been in the past. At Bluefields, the Cubans are taking over direct supervision of the airport and the port development. Cuban flights to Nicaragua have increased in frequency over the last several months.

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Director Casey (continued): Nicaragua is becoming more ominous as a likely Cuban base on the American mainland. They are much more active in training and organizing the Sandinista military forces. The airport and port development underway at Bluefields will strengthen the seaborne link with Cuba. A dredge is being sent from Bulgaria to deepen the port. They have recently opened a Cuban Consulate in this remote area.

The Sandinistas have now publicly announced that they are building a large military airport at Punta Huete. At the same time, they have announced their intentions to bring in jet fighters. Radars have been deployed at points which constitute the basis for a nation-wide air defense system.

Nicaragua has arranged for the delivery of five L-39 aircraft. Recently shipped crated L-39s

the crates still on the dock

The FDN is extremely concerned over the introduction of L-39 jet aircraft, which would pose an unacceptably high threat to FDN troops in the field and their air-resupply. The FDN Leadership has told us they have decided to do everything in their power to destroy the shipment of L-39s before they can be delivered, assembled, and deployed. They have looked at all possible means and believe that the most feasible option is to attack the aircraft in their crates at some point between the transfer from the Bulgarian ship and the time when they are loaded onto trucks to be driven to Managua. They have considered using their three O-2 CESSNA airplanes carrying rockets and machine guns or using a ground force to ambush the ships in the river or the convoy on the road. The Agency could provide intelligence assistance and operational guidance within its basic intelligence mission and within the current authorities provided by the Nicaraguan Finding.

The first priority is to get real time reporting on the means of transport and a real time schedule and location of the L-39 crates to the FDN.

The whole operation is a very "iffy" thing. Even if the shipment is seen, communications with the area have been interrupted during past shipments.

During arms shipments into El Bluff, the Sandinista Army increases its presence in the area considerably, actually taking over the operations of the port. They also station armed MI-8 helicopters, O-2s, and Siai-Marchetti fixed wing armed aircraft at El Bluff airfield.

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Director Casey (continued): Air defenses in the form of anti-aircraft and weapons are also reinforced in the El Bluff area, and the Sandinistas have SA-7 ground-to-air shoulder-fired missiles in their inventory. We believe that, if everything goes well, the O-2s would have about a 50% chance of destroying the L-39s in their crates and returning safely to Honduras.

The FDN will make the final decision as to whether or not they will undertake this mission. Whether the FDN can be dissuaded from attempting a mission they believe to be in their interest remains to be seen. As we saw in the case of last week's attack in Nicaragua, in which two American private citizens were killed, the CIA will be held responsible whether we help or not.

General Vessey: The L-39 aircraft described by Director Casey are much more than just trainers. [redacted] capabilities charts show that it can be armed to deliver air-to-ground, as well as air-to-air ordnance. It is a significant enhancement to the capabilities of the Sandinistas, both internally and vis-a-vis their neighbors.

The President: How would take the FDN take them out?

Director Casey: One way would be with the three O-2 aircraft that they used last week against the training site at Santa Clara (pictures shown). They could also attack them on the ground and there is the chance that they could mount an operation against the ship that offloads them at Bluefields.

Secretary Shultz: It would seem that there is one important thing we should not do. We should certainly not tell the FDN not to attack what they obviously see as a major threat to themselves. We should, however, make it clear to the FDN that we do have certain minimum requirements: no U.S. personnel on the operation, no direct CIA involvement in the attack, and no mines.

Mr. McFarlane: There is also the matter of public perception. We need to recognize that whether or not we help, we will be blamed. The target is also important. The fact that the FDN would be attacking a military aircraft delivery would seem to me to generate much more public, as well as Congressional, support.

Secretary Weinberger: On the other hand, we could pre-empt and portray this delivery as a significant change in the balance of regional military power. We could publicly and emphatically proclaim that the Sandinistas were doing just what Senator Moynihan forecast in his very eloquent speech about the new airbase Punta Huete. We can use then use the delivery of these aircraft to build Congressional support for what we will eventually have to do. The point can be made that this is like the Cuban missile crisis and that these aircraft have crossed the threshold of what we can accept. It may be that they can be equipped for nuclear ordnance--or maybe not. The point is that the Sandinistas have crossed a "red line" with their delivery.

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General Vessey: I'm not sure that these [ ] jet fighters will mean that much to the Congress or to the American people. They will certainly mean a lot to the Resistance Forces and to the Hondurans. Even though Honduras has Super Mystere fighters of their own, only three of them are working today. The fact that Honduras has twelve of these aircraft will still give critics ammunition that the Sandinistas are only trying to achieve to parity in the region. The question is, do we want to help keep the L-39s out of Nicaragua?

Ambassador Kirkpatrick: I like the pre-emptive publicity aspect and think we should describe how the L-39s change the nature of conflict in the region. We should confront the people and the Democrats with what this means. The Cubans are predictable. Once we give them a line they cannot cross, they won't cross it. The most important part is to build a groundswell of opposition to the delivery before it occurs. If I understood Bill correctly, they won't be there until the end of the month at the earliest. We need to escalate the public awareness of what this delivery means to the others in the region.

Secretary Shultz: General Vessey and my military people have told me that the L-39 is not as effective as the aircraft that the Hondurans have. It seems unlikely that we will be able to sustain any great public outcry against the delivery of what they will claim are simply [ ] jet trainers. I would find the public outcry to be attractive, if we are prepared to take action against the delivery.

[ ]

Ambassador Kirkpatrick: This is, indeed, not a "missile crisis" issue. Rather, our public escalation campaign should be designed to change the public's perception so that, if we have to act, they will be supportive.

Secretary Weinberger: That's right, the danger is in doing something without preparing the public and changing their perception.

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The President: Let me throw some flies in the milk on this one. Several months ago, I made a speech about Soviet ships delivering tanks and other military equipment to Nicaragua--that certainly didn't arouse any great public outcry against the Sandinistas or even the Soviets or Cubans. If we make this public, it would seem we simply make the FDN's job all the harder. All we are talking about is providing information to them which they will use, to basically protect themselves. I don't see how going public with our concerns is going to help.

General Vessey: If we are not going to act ourselves, what you suggest makes considerable sense if it is going to be the FDN who is going to respond.

Secretary Weinberger: No matter what, we need to start preparing the Congress.

The President: After the FDN acts, we can raise it with the public and the Congress.

Secretary Shultz: There has been a considerable--though incremental and some would say glacial--shift in public, Congressional, and international opinion towards our policy and the Sandinistas. Your speech on the Russian arms deliveries helped, although the results were not immediately visible. This type of incremental escalation on the part of the Sandinistas will also become evident, but we need to be cautious about what we would make known before the FDN has a chance to act. It is really up to them. If they want to act, do we want to help them?

The President: Going back to Jeane and Cap's point, what if we make this public immediately after the FDN makes their attempt?

Mr. McFarlane: The important point is that, if we start talking about anything before the fact, it creates an opportunity for demagoguery in this most political year. If the decision is taken to help the Contras in this effort, then the very most we should do is to simply tell the most responsible members on the Hill.

Mr. Meese: It is my understanding that all of what has been proposed can be done under the present Finding. If we authorize Bill to provide intelligence and advice, we are simply required to brief a select few in the Congress. This should solve the problem.

Attorney General French Smith: All actions proposed are, indeed, within the Finding.

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Mr. Baker: This is the worst time of all to try to prepare any public opinion on any activities in Central America.

Secretary Weinberger: We have to have an organized Congressional and public affairs plan for this. We have to remember that these L-39s may not even leave the dock.

The President: If the FDN acts, then we will use the event to help build support. We should hesitate to make any announcements of any kind in advance.

Mr. McFarlane: To summarize on this issue, it is agreed that the CIA will provide the advice and information needed by the FDN on the shipping, traffic, and all necessary intelligence on the movement of these aircraft. Second, in the Congress, only the Chairmen and Ranking Minority Members will be briefed on what we know about the L-39 delivery and the fact that we see them coming. There will be nothing said about any operation by the FDN.

Our final issue on the agenda is whether or not we should provide additional assistance to the Salvadoran interdiction campaign. Last month, GEN Paul Gorman briefed the Congress on the arms flow into El Salvador from Nicaragua. As a consequence of his briefings, Congress advised us of their concerns that we were not doing enough to interdict the flow of arms. [

[ ]  
The President: I have an appointment with several Congressmen upstairs that won't keep. Can I have your recommendations now?

Director Casey: [ ]

[ ]  
General Vessey: [ ]

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